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SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS: RULING HDZ LIKELY TO AVOID A
REBUKE FROM VOTERS

REF: ZAGREB 0005

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The local elections on May 17 (with second round runoffs as needed two weeks later) are likely to provide both of Croatia,s two main parties--the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the main opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP)--with a basis to claim "victory." Despite hard economic times and voter discontent with the Prime Minister, the HDZ is unlikely to face catastrophic losses and may even make some modest gains. While the SDP will capture the mayorships of many of the most important cities, the HDZ will likely do well at the level of the powerful county prefects--reflecting the HDZ,s strong support among rural voters. This election will also continue to winnow out many smaller parties in Croatia. It is likely that only two smaller parties--the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) and the Croatian People's Party (HNS)--will show any national appeal. END SUMMARY

HDZ BUILDS COALITIONS; WELL POSITIONED FOR COUNTY PREFECTS

12. (SBU) The HDZ has leveraged its relationship at the national level with its main coalition partner, the Croatian Peasants Party (HSS), to strike local coalition deals with the HSS, and several smaller parties, in 18 of 20 counties. This coalition will likely enable these parties to retain the 12 prefectures (8 HDZ, 4 HSS) that they currently hold, and perhaps even add one more. The HDZ s success in reaching local-level partnerships with the HSS--which in the past was much more likely to join with the SDP at the local-level--indicates that the HSS increasingly sees its partnership with the HDZ as an advantage for doling out perks to its base. The HDZ,s coalitions have less appeal, however, in Croatia,s urban centers. The HDZ candidates in the four largest cities are likely to lose in the first round of voting, and only two--Zadar and Karlovac--of Croatia,s eight largest cities are forecast to elect HDZ mayors.

SDP: MILANOVIC EXERTS CONTROL AND PROMOTES NEW FACES

13. (SBU) In stark contrast to the HDZ, the SDP has focused less on building coalitions with other parties, and more on reforming its local party branches. SDP President Zoran Milanovic has personally picked many local-level candidates--particularly mayoral candidates. This has produced several fresh faces among SDP candidates, but also made it harder for the SDP to reach out to potential coalition partners, who wanted some influence on candidate selection. In the end, the SDP was largely unable to form coalitions with the HSS or many other of the smaller parties represented in the national parliament. While the SDP can count on the support of the Croatian People,s Party (HNS) in many races, this relationship has become strained--the HNS opposes the re-election of the SDP,s incumbent mayor of Zagreb. Nonetheless, the SDP is likely to reaffirm its traditional strength in urban areas, and may even win power

from the HDZ in Split, Croatia,s second largest city and the hometown of Prime Minister Ivo Sanader.

MANY SMALLER PARTIES FACING BLEAK FUTURE

14. (SBU) Several smaller Croatian parties, still reeling from electoral setbacks in the 2007 general election, are likely to face another blow in these elections. The Croatian Party of Rights (HSP)--a right wing party with one seat in parliament--faces an uphill battle in nearly every race and is likely to win only the mayorship of the city of Slavonski Brod and a handful of assembly seats in a few cities across eastern Croatia. This effectively will diminish the HSP from a national level party to a marginal regional player. Similarly, the HSLs--part of the coalition government but with only two seats in parliament--faces a tough mayoral race in Bjelovar, one of the two party strongholds. HSLs vice president Ivan Cehok is positioned to retain his mayoral seat in Varazdin, but he will do so only by running as an independent and naming numerous non-party members to his ticket.

15. (SBU) There are few exceptions to increasing dominance of the two main parties, the HDZ and SDP, in Croatian politics. The HSS and HNS will remain the only small parties with a nation-wide presence or organization, although the HNS's appeal has taken a hit recently because of its current leadership (SEPTTEL). Two regional parties will also do well in their own fiefs. The Istrian Democratic Party--traditionally closely aligned with the SDP--should retain its electoral stranglehold on the Istrian peninsula and win the mayor of Pula and the county prefect of Istria.

The Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja (HDSSB)--a right wing party formed by former HDZ heavyweight, and indicted war criminal, Branimir Glavas--is likely to win the mayor,s race in Osijek and potentially hold on to the county prefect,s position as well.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) The upcoming local elections, the first to allow the direct election of mayors and county prefects (REFTEL), contain several tight races--such as mayoral races in Zagreb, Split, and Osijek, and county prefect races in Zagreb, Osijek, and Pozega. The opposition SDP should do well, but perhaps not as well as it might have expected, given the economic hard times. Given that these are Croatia,s final elections before the presidential ballot set for January 2010, all four main national parties--HDZ, SDP, HNS, HSS--will be looking closely at the local results in search of momentum for their eventual presidential candidates. END COMMENT.
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